

Statement of the Montana Association of Christians (MAC)
in Support of the Commission on Sentencing
Helena, Montana
June 23, 2016

Madam Chair and Members of the Commission:

I am Jana Staton, representing the Montana Association of Christians (MAC) as chair of MAC's Legislative Committee. The Montana Association of Christians (MAC), formerly Montana Association of Churches, brings together Christian communities and individuals to be present in the broken places of Montana. We seek to be a transformative advocate on issues that affect the most vulnerable and marginalized members of our communities, without regard to any religious affiliation. As people of faith in the Judeo-Christian tradition, we reject the myth that some of our citizens are not worthy of genuine care, concern, and compassion.

MAC has identified reentry into our communities by those returning from incarceration as one of our core legislative and social justice priorities. We are here today in strong support of the Commission on Sentencing's effort to improve reintegration into the community and community safety by straightening out a convoluted cycle of incarceration and revocation. MAC is particularly concerned with the inability of returning citizens to obtain safe, stable housing in our communities which affects their employment, behavioral health treatment, family reintegration and parenting. Across the state, barriers to safe and affordable housing not only contributes to higher recidivism, but lack of housing makes our communities less safe, as returning citizens end up in shelters, dangerous neighborhoods that jeopardize their success, or homeless and on the street.

Housing is the 'hot potato' that no one at the state seems to want to pick up. It's always some other committee, some other agency's responsibility. I am concerned that without effective support for reentry housing in our communities large and small, all the wonderful policy options identified by CSG-JC the Commission is considering today will not have the hoped-for outcomes of reducing recidivism and protecting public safety. How are local communities going to absorb a 10% or 20% increase in individuals being released to complete sentences or treatment in the community, if all our reentry coalitions are already struggling with housing now? I know how much effort our local parole officers put into helping clients find some kind of housing, especially if they are on a registry. Some folks in Missoula are living in camper vans as the only housing available to them; perhaps we should consider using a local RV dealer's consignment and storage facility as housing for parolees.

The Commission and Legislature should not believe the myth that Montana faith congregations, even those now committed to reentry ministry, mentoring and advocacy, are somehow going to 'step up and provide' or 'find' housing'. Congregations are already maxed out and struggling to help homeless families find somewhere to live. We need a substantial commitment from the state to affordable housing for our citizens. Please tell us at Montana Association of Christians where we can go if not here to be heard about housing those who are returning from incarceration and deserve a chance to succeed.